

The mirror of Odysseus

Roberto Chiappiniello Valente

Odysseus is one of the best-known Greek heroes, and one of the cleverest. Here, Roberto Chiappiniello Valente homes in on the moment in book 8 of the *Odyssey* when Odysseus listens to Demodocus sing of the fall of Troy, and, in particular, on one of the epic's longest similes. Through careful reading he shows what the passage reveals of our hero and how the *Odyssey*'s take on heroism differs from that of the *Iliad*.

'Who are you?' asks the Caterpillar in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Alice replies, 'I ... I hardly know, sir, at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then'.

Unlike Alice, Homer's Odysseus rarely hesitates. When the Phaeacian king, Alcinous, asks 'who are you?', Odysseus replies immediately:

I am Odysseus, Laertes' son. The whole world talks of my stratagems, and my fame has reached the heavens. (9.19–20)

And yet, Odysseus, who is proud of his shrewdness and fame gained on the battlefield, is not so sure of himself as to be able to maintain his composure. When in Alcinous' palace Demodocus, the travelling poet,

went on to sing how the Achaean warriors, leaving their hollow ambush, poured out from the horse to ravage Troy; (...) and how Odysseus, looking like Ares himself, ... engaged in the most terrible of all his fights (8.514–20)

Odysseus, who initially kept his tears secret by covering his head with the cloak, cannot stop sobbing to the extent that Alcinous asks him,

Explain to us also what sorrow makes you weep as you listen to the tragic story of the Argives and the fall of Troy. (...) Perhaps one of your kinsmen by marriage fell before Ilium, a brave man, your son-in-law possibly or your father-in-law (...)? Or perhaps some true friend, a kindred spirit? (8.577–84)

But Odysseus has lost neither a relative nor a family member – indeed the prophet Teiresias, whom he encountered in the

underworld, had confirmed that both his wife and son were alive and waiting for him in Ithaca. Why does he cry? Is he not proud of what he has achieved? In answering these questions, we get closer to who Odysseus really is.

Victors as victims

The *Odyssey* unpacks Odysseus' reaction in one of its longest similes, which compares his tears to those spilled by victims of war.

While the famous minstrel was singing, Odysseus' heart was melting with grief and his cheeks were wet with the tears that ran down from his eyes. He wept as a woman weeps when she throws her arms round the body of her beloved husband, fallen in battle in front of his city and his comrades, fighting to save his city and his children from the evil day. She has found him gasping in the throes of death; she clings to him wailing and lamenting. But the enemy come up and beat her back and shoulders with spears, as they lead her off into slavery and a life of miserable toil, with her cheeks wasted by her pitiful grief. Equally pitiful were the tears that now welled up in Odysseus' eyes, and though he succeeded in hiding them from everyone else, Alcinous could not help observing his condition; he was sitting next to him and heard his heavy groans. (8.521–31)

Scholars call this a 'reversed simile' since a character is cast in a role that is the reverse of his/her true status. As a 'reversed simile', it sheds light on Odysseus by offering us a 'mirror image' of the hero. Unlike the Phaeacians, who live far away from civilization ('Remote,

we are at the edge of the world and come in contact with no other people', says Alcinous' daughter, Nausicaa at 6.201–3), have never experienced war, and thus enjoy Demodocus' tale, Odysseus' heart melts with grief (this expression recurs only once in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus' wife Penelope listens to him tell 'Cretan tales' and melts like snow (19.204–7)), and his tears are pitiful. He cries like a woman, a defeated woman; he is not a victor but a victim. He understands that the war has only brought destruction and sorrow. In this way, the *Odyssey* also offers a 'mirror image' of the *Iliad*, a negative perspective of the heroics of the Trojan War, in which sorrow seems to outweigh glory (or, to use the Greek word, *kleos*). Odysseus and his author reflect on the necessity of war and whether *kleos* is all that matters. Indeed, on this point the words of the dead Achilles, whom Odysseus meets in the underworld, are revealing:

I would rather work the soil as a serf on hire to some landless impoverished peasant than be King of all these lifeless dead. (11.489–91)

Men as women

Odysseus cries like a woman cries over the body of her dead husband as she is beaten by the enemy, and dragged into slavery. Within the context of Demodocus' story about the Trojan War and the wooden horse, the simile's emphasis on tears, on a wife embracing her husband, and on a city and its children reminds the reader of one bit of the *Iliad* in particular – that moment in book 6, at the Scaean Gate when Odysseus' enemy, the Trojan prince Hector is accosted by his wife Andromache with their son in her arms. 'Andromache came close to him with her tears falling, and took his hand and spoke to him' (6.404). They then debate the conflicting pressures of seeking *kleos* and being a family.

Towards the end of the *Iliad* (22.461–3), Andromache 'came to the tower... she stood on the wall and stared out, and saw him being dragged in front of the city'. Even the phrasing of this passage (*prosthen polios*, 'in front of the city') is picked up by the *Odyssey*'s simile, which

goes as far as to place it in the same metrical position. With Andromache in view, it is hard not to think too of *Iliad* 24.724: ‘White-armed Andromache began [her] lamentation, holding murderous Hector’s head between her hands’. Perhaps Odysseus had witnessed this tragic scene? Certainly, his tears suggest that he is regretting, or at least reappraising, his ‘heroic’ actions.

Learning through grief

When in the *Iliad* Hector’s father, Priam, seeks to convince Achilles to release his corpse to him, he appeals to Achilles by conjuring an image of his father, Peleus. Achilles, for once, sympathizes with Priam, he understands the sorrows of human loss, and the consequence that his anger and thirst for glory has had on other people. However, even then, Achilles does not cry; instead he controls his emotions and brutally tells Priam not to continue begging; otherwise, possessed by anger, he would not be responsible for his own actions. The hero of the *Iliad* is not like the hero of the *Odyssey*. Achilles seeks to soothe his own despair by causing other people sorrow. He even says as much explicitly:

But now my wish is to win great glory, to make some of the deep-breasted Trojan and Dardanian women wipe the tears with both hands from their soft cheeks and set them wailing loud.

(*Iliad* 18.121–4)

By contrast, Odysseus has already made the decisive move of ‘meeting’ the enemy and is confronting the implications of his actions.

In the simile of book 8, Odysseus is at the same time spectator and actor, winner and loser. Does he cry for the hero that he once was? For the many years spent away from his family while he was inflicting pain on others? In that simile, Homeric *kleos* turns to *algos* (pain). While Demodocus sings, Odysseus changes from being one of the protagonists of the *Iliad* into one of its readers/listeners. Demodocus’ singing functions like a powerful mirror in which Odysseus, who during his long and tortuous return has experienced separation from his family, recognizes that his enemy’s suffering is not dissimilar from his own. He cries because he sympathizes with his victims (*sympatheia* in Greek means, in fact, sharing someone’s grief) and because he realizes that when he lived these events, he had not understood their meaning. Before hearing the story, Odysseus, like Alice, did not know who he really was; it takes someone else to tell his life-story for him to realize his own destiny. In recalling the sorrows of war, he showcases the virtue of

Greek tragedy: *pathei mathos*, learning through grief.

Roberto Chiappiniello Valente teaches Classics at St Mary’s School, Calne in Wiltshire. Before that he was head of Classics at Leweston School in Sherborne, and taught Greek and Latin at the universities of Manchester (where he got his PhD) and Leeds. His specialism is late antique literature. He is at least as clever as Odysseus and way more self-knowing.